

**I**F YOU'RE FEELING PARTICULARLY stressed or anxious, there's a good chance what you've eaten has exacerbated or even created those uncomfortable feelings. That's because your digestive system is incredibly sensitive and comprises a whole microbiome of good bacteria. These bacteria have been found to influence weight, heart health, immunity and levels of inflammation in your body, and now it's becoming more apparent that they also impact your mental wellbeing.

'On a basic level, we've always known the gut and brain are linked – if you feel nervous, you tend to feel it in your stomach,' says registered dietician Laura Clark (lecnutrition.co.uk). 'But what we're now understanding is that the types of good bacteria you have, and [their] numbers, can influence the way

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# Eating to FEEL CALM

With the gut-brain connection established, here's how you can eat to feel happy and relaxed.



your brain is able to cope with certain conditions.' And this includes stress, anxiety and depression.

As a result, scientists have deemed our stomachs a 'second brain' and, over the past few years, research has emerged revealing just how interconnected the gut and brain are. It's estimated that 90 per cent of your body's serotonin – the 'happy hormone' – is produced in your gut. And this connection is of a cyclical nature, with your feelings of stress impacting your microbiome, and an imbalanced microbiome affecting feelings of anxiety. So can the food you eat help improve your mental wellbeing?

### FILL UP ON FIBRE

As scientific understanding of the gut-brain connection has increased, so too has exploration into the different foods that can impact the microbiome – in turn, influencing stress levels and overall mental wellbeing. 'We have to make sure we're feeding the bacteria the sort of diet that enables them to thrive,' says Laura.

Fibre is one of the most beneficial components you can incorporate into your meals when looking to improve gut health and reduce stress. People eating a diet comprising plenty of fibrous foods are likely to experience less stress and anxiety-driven behaviours, according to research by APC Microbiome Ireland.

To obtain a hearty dose of fibre, increase your vegetable intake. 'We need to eat lots of different types of vegetables – variety is important, as well as eating enough portions each day,' says nutritional therapist Catherine Arnold ([catherinearnoldnutrition.com](http://catherinearnoldnutrition.com)). 'Aim for 8-10 portions daily for optimum health.'

They say variety is the spice of life – and you can find fibre in a host of other plant-based foods, too. In addition to veg, look to include 'anything from fruit, nuts and seeds to pulses, legumes and wholegrains,' says Laura. But this doesn't mean you have to become vegan, as eating meat, fish or dairy products 'won't impact your body's coping mechanisms against stress,' adds Laura.

### GO FOR FERMENTED FOODS

Another type of food shown to boost good gut bacteria and thereby reduce stress is fermented foods, according to a scientific paper by US and Canadian researchers. 'Foods such as miso, kefir, sauerkraut and kimchi can support optimal levels of good



bacteria, plus the process of fermenting the food optimises its nutrient content,' says Catherine.

Aside from fibrous and fermented fare, other foods that support a healthy microbiome include ginger, oily fish, eggs, dark chocolate, turmeric and bone broth, which help heal the gut lining.

But, just as there are foods that positively affect your gut and, in turn, help lower stress, there are those that can have a negative impact. 'These include processed food, added sugars and alcohol,' says nutritionist Gabriela Peacock ([gpnutrition.com](http://gpnutrition.com)).

That's not to say you can't enjoy the odd treat here and there – sometimes, ice cream or a glass of wine on a Friday night is just what you need. 'If you can follow some basic principles 80 per cent of the time, you'll be healthier as a result,' adds Gabriela.

### MAKE SMALL CHANGES

Eating at regular intervals and not skipping meals is also important, as this helps keep your blood sugar balanced – high blood sugar increases cortisol, the stress hormone. 'Incorporating a form of protein into each

Fibre is one of the most beneficial things you can add to your meals if wanting to improve your gut health and reduce stress.



meal will help keep it steady,' says Catherine.

If you're looking for a supplement, then probiotics – live microorganisms that can be obtained both through foods such as yogurt but also in a concentrated capsule or drink – have been shown to positively influence your mental health. In fact, the consumption of these can lead to a notable reduction in anxiety and depression, and also lower cortisol levels, according to French researchers.

Although making changes to your diet is something you can do right now, you'll need to be patient and allow time to experience the benefits. 'It depends on the individual and the state of their gut health,' says Catherine. 'I expect to see positive benefits on gut health within 3-6 months.' Fortunately, these changes can have a faster impact on stress and anxiety. 'From my experience with clients, they often see an improvement in their stress levels much more quickly – sometimes within a week,' she adds.

Next time you go to pick up a snack or plan a dinner, consider the foods that will help you feel better in the long term – and your body and brain will love you for it.

## Meals to ease stress

Try these dishes to improve your gut health and mental wellbeing.

**Drinks:** water, peppermint tea, ginger tea, turmeric tea or latte, probiotic shots

### DAY 1

**Breakfast:** No-added sugar live yogurt with chopped banana, 1tbsp flaxseed, nuts/seeds.

**Lunch:** Slice of rye bread toast with two poached eggs, asparagus and some spinach.

**Dinner:** Mixed beans with kale, organic chicken breast, broccoli and lemon juice.

**Snacks:** Miso soup with nori, two squares of dark chocolate.

### DAY 2

**Breakfast:** Banana and blueberry pancakes, with coconut yogurt [full recipe over the page].

**Lunch:** Greek salad with chickpeas, drizzled with olive oil.

**Dinner:** Grilled salmon fillet with lentils and broccoli.

**Snacks:** Small handful of almonds, an orange.

### DAY 3

**Breakfast:** Spinach and mushroom omelette.

**Lunch:** Buckwheat noodles with cubed tofu, edamame beans and miso dressing [Full recipe over the page].

**Dinner:** Baked sweet potato with houmous and sweetcorn, green salad sprinkled with seeds.

**Snacks:** Two brown rice crackers with nut butter, handful of blackberries.

### DAY 4

**Breakfast:** Porridge with mixed berries, 1tbsp flaxseed, and some nuts and seeds.

**Lunch:** Quinoa, tenderstem broccoli and poached egg on a bed of kale.

**Dinner:** Squash and tomato curry with brown rice and roasted cauliflower [full recipe over the page].

**Snacks:** Two squares of dark chocolate, two nectarines.

### DAY 5

**Breakfast:** Cacao chia seed pudding.

**Lunch:** Green leaf salad topped with black beans, roasted peppers and some grilled courgette.

**Dinner:** Miso chicken with brown rice and kimchi.

**Snacks:** Small handful pumpkin seeds, an apple.







A squash and tomato curry gives a boost to your intake of gut-friendly veg.

### Squash and tomato curry with brown rice and roasted cauliflower (Serves 2)

- Butternut squash 250g, peeled and diced
- Uncooked brown rice 140g
- Olive oil
- Onion 1, chopped
- Garlic 1 clove, minced
- Tomatoes 100g, quartered
- Cumin 1tsp
- Garam masala 1tsp
- Coconut milk 200ml
- Cauliflower ½, broken into florets
- Fresh parsley to garnish
- Flaked almonds to garnish

- 1 Preheat the oven to 180C. Place the squash on a baking tray and drizzle with olive oil, shaking to toss. Cook for 25 mins, then remove (but keep the oven on).
- 2 Cook rice according to pack instructions.
- 3 Heat a drizzle of olive oil in a large pan. Add in the onion and garlic and cook until lightly brown, then add the squash, tomatoes, spices and coconut milk, and stir to combine. Place a lid over the top, turn the heat to simmer and leave to cook for 25 mins.
- 4 Spread the cauliflower florets onto a baking tray, drizzle with olive oil, and season to taste. Cook for 20-25 mins, until they turn golden.
- 5 Divide the curry between two plates and serve with rice and roasted cauliflower, sprinkled with the parsley and almonds.



### Buckwheat noodles with cubed miso tofu, edamame beans and spring onion (Serves 2)

- Brown miso paste 1tbsp
- Rice vinegar 1tbsp
- Ginger 1cm piece, minced
- Firm tofu 140g, cubed
- Edamame beans 180g, frozen
- Buckwheat noodles 200g
- Olive oil
- Mushrooms 50g, sliced
- Sesame seeds 2tsp

- 1 In a bowl, mix the miso paste, rice vinegar and ginger, then add the cubed tofu. Stir to ensure all the tofu is covered in the mix and leave to marinate in the fridge for 30 mins.
- 2 Defrost the edamame beans and cook the noodles according to the packet instructions.
- 3 Heat a pan and add a drizzle of oil. Place in the tofu, and cook until the side touching the pan starts to brown. Turn and cook until all sides are golden. Remove from heat.
- 4 Add a drizzle of oil and the mushrooms to the pan and cook for 2-3 mins.
- 5 Drain the noodles and divide between two bowls. Place half the edamame beans onto each and top with the tofu and mushrooms. Sprinkle sesame seeds on the top and serve immediately. 🌱



### Banana and blueberry pancakes with coconut yogurt (Serves 2)

- Banana 1 large, mashed
- Eggs 2
- Flaxseed 1½tbsp
- Baking powder ½tsp
- Blueberries, large handful
- Olive oil
- Coconut yogurt to serve

- 1 In a bowl, mix the banana, eggs, flaxseed and baking powder, then gently stir in the blueberries so as not to burst them.
- 2 Heat a non-stick frying pan and drizzle in a small amount of olive oil. Brush to cover the base of the pan.
- 3 Carefully pour or spoon half the batter mix into two pancake shapes in the pan, and allow to cook on a medium heat for a couple of minutes. Flip and cook for 2 mins on the other side.
- 4 Repeat with remaining mixture.
- 5 Serve immediately, with a generous dollop of coconut yogurt.